Leaving home

The Goddess Durga for sale? Hardly a surprise. We’ve been purchasing take-home idols of all persuasions, dimensions and materials since we created god in our own image. The market for new (never mind old) idols is booming, and never more so than in the run-up to Dasain. Still, seeing Durga ensconced in the window display of a boutique catering to Nepal’s expats was something of a surprise. The goddess is sitting pretty, as is the diminutive Ganesh in the corner. Here’s to beginnings, prosperity and good over evil.

God Goods

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Leaving home

Nepal Times wishes all its readers and partners a happy Dasain, Chhat, Eid. Because of the holidays, there will be no issue of Nepal Times on 2 October. The next hardcopy edition of the paper will come out on 9 October. Log on to www.nepalitimes.com for regular news updates.

Going home
Bizarre but banal


everything changes, everything stays the same

TIMELINE

And so the blessed break for blessings is finally here. As forested by all and sundry, nothing extraordinary has transpired these last couple of weeks, and we hold a sigh of relief as we tramp back high on the heavy tides of traffic, having braved the New Road masses, to singularly recollected news bulletins.

Despite the endless speculation, the UML-led government is still intact. Yet, in the UML itself too, there are signs Siriga batu has accepted these realities for now. Even the historic people’s revolt appears to be on the backburner, but if it catches by surprise, rest assured it will be televised.

Dasiun is here! So much has changed these past two decades – we’ve moved from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy to free, elected government, particularly Sujita Koirala, got her first breath and quickly engineered a demand for elections, I’m glad someone’s doing something about it. And the help’s coming from the most unexpected of places: villagers, the people.

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Homeward Bound

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Whatever the naysayers bang on about, Dasain remains a quintessentially Nepali festival. Whether you choose to celebrate it or not, when you see the kites flutter in the vigorous seasonal winds, you see determination-based family units trooping around your neighbourhood with huge plaster’s of tikka on their foreheads, when you hear the shouts of ‘maana’ from the katha pandals, for an instant at least, one hopes we’ll all remember our differences and think of them as the diversity that could still make us a great nation.

Dasiun is here! Enjoy the eye of the storm while it swirls around us. Who knows, we may even bring something out of it to sustain us through the rest of the year and beyond, if we are wise enough and brave enough to withstand those winds of change that threaten to blow us off course.

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LETTERS

The Janakpur Today gives its readers more than just the usual fare of political and social commentary. It also shows how personal opinions and emotions can shape the way we perceive and interpret the world around us. Sometimes it can be a powerful tool to encourage social change and bring attention to important issues. The editors@nepalitimes.com

Marketing Manager: www.nepalitimes.com

Desk Editor: Printed at Jagadamba Press 5250017-19

GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu 5250333/845

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Enduring relevance of Dasain

Ironically, those who gave Dasain pan-Nepal acceptability have begun to call for its boycott.

There are supposed to be 330 million deities in the Hindu pantheon, but even the most learned of priests is unlikely to be able to recite the names of more than a hundred. Goddesses are easier to remember as many of them are worshipped under one or another name during Dasain, considered by many the national festival of Nepal. In its various forms, the Mother Goddess embodies all the qualities of the maker, the protector and the destroyer represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh of the male Hindu trinity.

The practice of mother worship is probably pre-Aryan and has co-existed with the tradition of ancestor worship since hunter-gatherer times. In South India, Amma, the mother, is the guardian of most villages. Jai Bhawani used to be the war cry of Marathas just as Bengalis went to war shouting Jai Durge, and the ferocious Kali was worshipped by the warriors of Central India. The enduring appeal of Sati, the mother eternal, has been the distinctive mark of Hinduism in the mountainous regions between Assam and Kashmir. In Mithila, the mother is Bhairavi, the deity of decay who sets the stage for renewal.

In all her forms, the goddess is the embodiment of cosmic energy. She is Shakti, the Supreme Power. Worship of the Mother Goddess is often laden with Tantric rituals. Considering the complexity involved in appeasing female deities, worshipping Shiva is a lot simpler. Shivaratri has a decent claim to being the national festival of the country, the presiding deity being none other than the Lord of Animals. Indra and Vishnu, too, have been venerated in the Kathmandu Valley since the time of the Lichhavis. Indrajatra itself marks the day when the forces of Prithvi Narayan Shah vanquished the unprepared warriors of the last Malla king of Kathmandu. The Gorkha court could have easily ordained that their day of victory be marked with festivities. But somehow Dasain established itself as the main socio-religious festival of Nepal.

There are many stories explaining the significance of Dasain. According to Ramayan legends, Rama sought the blessing of Durga to defeat the demon-king Ravana. In another narrative of the triumph of good over evil, Mahisashurmardini trounces an animal demon to free the earth from its excesses. These are interesting stories, but not everyone who celebrates Dasain knows much about them. For most Nepalis, Dasain is the festival and that’s it.

Ironically, those who gave Dasain pan-Nepal acceptability have begun to call for its boycott. In keeping with the Urdu-laden Gorkha Bhasha and the lack of official caste hierarchy within the British and Indian Gorkhas, the lahures kept the faith with their own secular celebrations of religious festivities such as Dasain and Tihar. Thus they kept in touch with the idea of Nepal and Nepalis rather than their own ethnic particularities. As long as these indefatigable fighters continue to serve abroad, Dasain celebrations there will retain their secular character. It may not be politically correct to say so in these times, but Dasain is indeed the ‘national’ festival of Nepal, and it has an international face.
A cruise fit for Pharaohs

As the holidays begin, some Nepalis are packing their bags to go abroad. These days, some are headed to Egypt. Last year alone, about three hundred Nepalis toured the land of the Pharaohs. Jeyvan Shrestha of the Egyptian embassy in Kathmandu says, “This is the figure for Nepali residents; the figure for non-resident Nepalis is even higher.” More conventional holiday destinations for Nepalis are Goa, Mauritius, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Egypt is the new hot spot. And it’s no surprise — about 11 million international tourists visit Egypt annually.

The Middle East can be fun for Nepalis too

Egypt’s rich history not only makes it a favourite among tourists, but researchers and historians too. Tourist attractions in the country include the Great Pyramids of Giza, along with the Nile and the Khan Ali Khalil Bajar of Cairo.

A trip to Egypt is never complete without a cruise on the Nile. A train trip of about 15 to 16 hours from Cairo gets you to Aswan Bandargah, where cruise packages are available. The three-day package on the five-star rated SS Karim is the most popular. Aswan Bandargah, where cruise packages are available. The three-day package on the five-star rated SS Karim is the most popular. Aswan Bandargah, where cruise packages are available. The three-day package on the five-star rated SS Karim is the most popular. Aswan Bandargah, where cruise packages are available. The three-day package on the five-star rated SS Karim is the most popular.

Nili Shah, sales executive for Marco Polo Travels, explains that an 8-day trip to Egypt is available for Rs7000-8000, inclusive of a plane ticket and a tour around Cairo, Giza, Luxor and other cities as well as a Nile cruise. It seems the offer is a tempting one. Most Nepali women who have used Kathmandu as a transit point. The Government of Nepal has banned the migration of women as domestic help. So Sahana submitted fake documents claiming she would be working in a hotel. The ban, in isolation, has done little to help women who are willing to risk all to join the Gulf rush. “Sahana writes to us and even calls asking for us to rescue her but there is no way we can help her,” says Nirjala Bhattarai, director of Pourakhi.

Most Nepali women who have become domestic workers in the Gulf use Delhi and Mumbai as transit points. They obtain passports from local agents who help them get through the transit points. They obtain passports from local agents who help them get through the transit points. They obtain passports from local agents who help them get through the transit points.

More than 40 countries, there has been a surge in the number of Nepalis booking tickets to Egypt. According to Kalpana Shrestha of Gulf Air Nepal, which flies to cities as well as a Nile cruise. It seems the offer is a tempting one.

A subsidised orientation course is available to provide information on the destination, workplace safety and labour rights. The ban has also come up with a rescue package for migrant workers who have lost their jobs to the recession. Of the 234 workers who have claimed compensation, none were women. “It might be that women migrant workers work as domestic help, so they are the least affected,” says Sahan Shrestha Devkota, Executive Director of the board. But to claim the package, a diagnostic test, a government labour permit and the recruitment agency’s receipts are required. “Most of the women migrant workers sought illegal means because of the government’s ban on domestic workers,” says Bhattarai. How can the government be soathetic towards this problem when women make such a significant contribution to the national economy?“
Lucky two

F donated a total of £10,000 to Nepal and The Himalayan Trust’s Project Himalaya to acquire
announced the first lucky draw winners of Nokia yaspakilo Dasain Tihar double taba offer. The winners Bijaya Lal Dangol and Raheal Haritala each won Bajaj bikes.

Climate change

As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility program, WorldLink has joined hands with WWF’s Climate for Life to spread awareness about the changing climate in the Himalayas. WorldLink will be supporting the online communications and outreach activities for the campaign.

Winner

“Signature Golf Challenge” was organised at Gokarna Golf Club last week. The winner of the tournament was Jung Chul Pyo with 39 stable ford.

Celebration

FOSS Nepal Community celebrated the sixth International Software Freedom Day on 19 September at Yala Baby Club. Maya Kendra, Lalitpur. Also Minister for Information and Communication Shankar Pokharel unveiled ‘Nikvista 2.0’, a compilation of free/open source software.

Working better together

Q uality of growth was in the minds of policymakers, development practitioners and academics at the Asia Regional Conference held in New Delhi last week. The conclusion of the meeting was that when economic growth takes place, benefits do not always go to the poor.

By encouraging participatory processes to share what has worked in different parts of Asia, the conference sought to look at ways to make growth inclusive of the least empowered and the most vulnerable. The session was set when growth was described as a situation in which, ideally, “there are higher real wages, lower real food prices, and labour market opportunities for the poor”.

A session in which I took part examined how the private sector, the public sector and civil society organisations can forge alliances to provide social protection measures to the poor.

Civil society: Most development-oriented NGOs work to give a voice to the voiceless so that the concerns of the marginalised are represented in public forums and are addressed. The poor often do not have access to healthcare, childcare, pension funds, shelter and basic amenities such as toilets and water. But as we have seen again and again in Nepal, when calamity strikes, political representatives are not the fastest providers of relief.

Given the range of services that the poor need, well-intentioned NGOs face two choices: forever approach donors for funding for various activities, or look for ways to organise the poor. The latter, if done well, gives the poor a chance to form cooperatives and alliances that can create partnerships or join with the public and the private sectors for the delivery of services and goods. The NGOs’ value-addition work consists of organizing the poor, giving them know-how and connecting them to opportunities that match their needs.

One example that came up was of a project of the Asia Fund in India that collects deposits from the poor and provides basic-money-related services to those not yet included in the financial sector. Likewise, once the poor are organised, NGOs can help them set up health cooperatives that bring doctors and medicines to the villages.

The public sector: An enlightened government can design frameworks and regulations that ensure the poor have access to growth opportunities. Vouchers and security staff.

For further information www.ebtrust.org.uk

CASTAWAYS

For Nepali boys rescued from south of the border, this Dasain really could mean the victory of good over evil

E arly one morning last week a group of six men stood by the roadside in Brainarahwa, sipping analogously of hot tea. Ten days previously their villages had been visited by Shalaja C.M. and Dilu Tamang of Kathmandu-based NGO The Esther Benjamin Memorial Foundation (EBMF). They’d brought the astonishing news that the men’s sons, nephews and brothers, who had been up for dead, had been found in children’s homes in Delhi. The men were now waiting with nervous anticipation to join Shalaja and Dilu on the 24-hour bus journey to Delhi to bring the boys home.

The plight of Nepali children in Indian children’s homes first came to EBMF’s attention earlier this year. According to press reports, 500 displaced-Nepali children are living in conditions that cater for only the most basic of needs. They are unhygienic, hungry, and never discharged onto the streets, homeless and without prospects, once they reach 18.

EBMF’s current underway seeks to get to the bottom of the situation. What are these children doing in Indian children’s homes, and what can be done about it? The initial impression is that many are child-trafficking victims who end up washed up on the doors of children’s homes. They are then given a false identity, for purposes of protection.

The uncle of one of the boys told of the horrors he had been through. He had been picked up on the streets of Kathmandu and taken to an institution where he was beaten, starved and left to die. He had survived, thanks to the intervention of his uncle.

After the successful rescue of three of the boys shortly after their arrival in Delhi, the hopes of the EBMF team were high as they departed for the Philkari Children’s Home to retrieve the other three boys. The necessary paperwork was in place and security staff.

Forty-five minutes after finally gaining access, Akash Malla, brother of twelve-year-old Suraj Malla (name changed), reappeared ashen-faced. He had been informed that his brother had run away. The boy insisted that Suraj had somehow ‘disappeared’ after being taken to hospital for treatment for a minor wound. Akash was double checked in a medical centre on-site and the details of precisely when Suraj ran away were sketchy. He had not been permitted to see his brother’s file.

But there was some relief for others. After battling seemingly insurmountable obstacles related to access and identity inconsistencies in the paperwork, as well as the inexplicable absence of a key decision-maker from the home, the case went to Court. When the judge demanded a letter of authority from the Nepal Embassy, Raju’s father announced his refusal to leave the court that day without his son. EBMF’s local partner, ChildLine India Foundation, was helpful in the following discussion of the provisions of the Indian Juvenile Justice Act, the judge permitted.

For further information www.ebtrust.org.uk
“I’m very relaxed”

Parmanand Jha: I haven’t been outside my house since 30 August. Like at Baburam Bhattarai earlier, I still meet various people, but at my house. I feel like I’m in a state of house arrest somewhat like the democratic leader of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi. People are even bombing my house now. I’d be beaten up if I left my house.

How does it feel being holed up at home like this?
I am very relaxed. I’ve no worries and no complications. I haven’t felt the need to go out but in any case I haven’t been forbidden from doing so. And my pension as a judge has been enough for two meals a day.

Why aren’t you leaving home? Are you humiliated that the government has removed the flag and security from your home?
Not at all. It’s better not to have a flag that’s a matter of debate waving uselessly atop your home and car. Even though the government has removed the national flag, the same flag will honour my dead body as the first Nepali vice president. And as far as my post is concerned, I am still the vice president. I was elected by six hundred and one CA members, until and unless those members decide otherwise, none can expel me from the post.

If you were not retaking the oath in Nepal, why did you make the President and the Prime Minister wait for hours on 30 August? I had met President Ram Baran Yadav twice and Prime MinisterMadhav Kumar Nepal thrice to make my stance about retaking the oath clear. Even when the Madhesi parties suggested I retake the oath in Maithili, I’d fairly refused, fearing another controversy. And on 30 August itself, I called a press conference at 1:30PM to announce that I was not retaking the oath. After all this, I see absolutely no reason for them to have waited. It was just a play to put the blame on me.

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Illegal logging

Bhola Paswan in Naya Patrika, 20 September

Loggers have been bribing office-holders of Community Forest User Groups in Saptari district to help them access timber in the national forests of the region. The loggers agree to leave the community forests alone, but pay commissions to post-holders of the user groups. Illegally logged timber from national forests is smuggled to the Indian market with the connivance of said post-holders. Although the district boasts 218 community forests, only 12 are operating lawfully, according to the District Forest Administration. But illegal logging is taking place in community forests as well. Says Nasiblal Yadav of Bhimphedi community forest, “Corruption has ruined the entire forest user’s group.”

Only this year, 17 bicycles belonging to loggers and 178 lots of timber were discovered in various forests in Saptari.

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Poaching

Thakur Singh Tharu in Nayapatrika, 20 September

On Friday evening, Madan and Bahadur Tamang were discovered with 5 kg of dried deer meat at a security checkpoint as they were on their way to Kathmandu. Similarly, Anil Thapa of the Armed Police Force was found with a kilo of dried deer meat at the Kailali border. Thapa had handed a carton of the meat to a bus driver going to Kathmandu and told him that someone at Kailalpur would receive it. All three have been charged.

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Transport thugs

Editorial in Annapurna Post, 20 September

Public transport, including Tata sumos and microbuses on the highway route connecting Birganj, Hetauda and Kathmandu have suddenly increased their fares. Unsurprisingly, they’ve taken advantage of the holiday season, when demand for public transport raises. It’s obvious that there’s collusion between the owners of these vehicles and government bureaucrats. Businessmen especially are behaving unethically. But the people who are supposed to stop these crimes aren’t doing much about it. “They may be illegally hiking prices, but we can’t pursue them. The vehicles we have at our disposal are all out of order,” says a government official.

Whether it’s Dasain or Eid, Chhat or Tihar, people will pay a little extra when they have to. Businessmen are fully aware of this. And it’s not just happening on the aforementioned routes. Customers are often told there is no transport available. But wait, if you pay a little extra, perhaps something can be arranged? Once the customer is resigned to this, suddenly the missing transport turns up. Such is the psychological hold the swindlers have over their customers that the latter actually feel as if they have scored a victory when paying double the price. Sometimes they don’t even get a valid ticket for their trouble.

If the government is to save its citizens from such scams, it seriously needs to strengthen its follow-up mechanisms. Businessmen, too, need to understand that cheating and lying is no way to do business in the long term.
“They are afraid of destroying their vote banks”

The industrial town of Hetauda is dominated by workers from a mix of ethnicities and languages. This heterogeneous society in the middle of the country desires equality above all in the restructuring of the state. Hinal Khabarpatra spoke to residents on the challenges of constitution writing and federalism.

Himal Khabarpatrika: Why has constitution-writing not been able to gain momentum?

Sobin Thing (Secretary, Tamsaling Volunteer Front): There is a conspiracy among them to make the Constituent Assembly meaningless by obstructing the constitution-writing process.

Surya Chandra Neupane (Nepal Red Cross Society): The Maoists think that they have the right to all the power and that “the losers should run away,” which is an old saying: “so what if they are the biggest party in the CA, they didn’t get a majority.” This has affected the constitution-writing process.

Pratap Bista (Central Member, Federation of Nepalese Journalists): The parties don’t understand the political realities. They are still thinking in terms of who lost and who won. Each group is thinking of a constitution that suits its interests rather than a good constitution.

Are the political parties incapable of writing the constitution or is it just that they haven’t been able to focus on it?

Rita Khanal (Nepal Trade Union Congress): Not all the parties act according to the commitments they have made. Civil society has not only been unable to raise its voice but has also been influenced by political interests. Why hasn’t the media been able to expose the Maoists’ lack of interest in writing the constitution?

Rajan Mainali (Human Rights and Peace Society): It’s not fair to say that all civil society is politicised. The political parties themselves tend to call on civil society when they need to but neglect otherwise. They are dishonest.

Kumar Tamang (Tamsaling Freedom Front): Ethnicity-based political parties have mushroomed, and the mainstream parties will have to grant ethnic autonomy. There is a suspicion that this is why the parties haven’t given priority to constitution-writing.

Bhagwati Pudasaini (Village Women Service Centre): The pessimism of the leadership has killed the hopes of the people that the constitution will be fair. The people have been pressurising the parties.

P.B. Gole Tamang (Nepal Democratic Tamang Society Front): There is no doubt that the parties are committed to writing the constitution. They managed to write the interim constitution, hold Constituent Assembly elections, and declare a republic. And mostly they elected the chair of the Constitutional Committee and the army integration committee. This gives us hope.

Everyone is committed to restructuring the state. But they haven’t been able to come to an agreement. Why is this?

Shiva Prasad Koirala (Civilian Support Front): We only have 7-8 months to complete the constitution but the parties are not clear on what kind of federalism they want. The people understood that cross-party agreement was necessary – this is why they didn’t give any of them an absolute majority. Federalism should also be based on a similar division of power.

Sobin Thing: The Maoists used ethnic and regional slogans but once they were in power they resided rather than fulfill their promises. The song speaks of a garland of a hundred flowers but some are still trying to ensure the garland is made up of a single kind of flower.

Mukunda Prasad Adhikari (Bar Court, Hetauda): History shows that haste makes ahash of things. We should learn this from the interim constitution. The other thing is rather than the political parties directing the ethnic groups, there is a risk the ethnic groups may control the parties. This could lead to conflict.

Krishna Prasad Dahal (UML): What do you think?

Amrit Kumar Lama (Lawyer): We cannot turn our backs on federalism and democracy. It is because the state did not consider the peoples of Magar, Tamsaling, Limbuwan and the Madhesis first and foremost Nepal that this problem arose. But these people should also think of themselves as Nepali.

“Big leaders are hurdles”

Mohammad Ilyas Rai, MJF CA member, Banke-2

How have you spent the last year in the CA?

The CA hasn't been able to work properly because the parties have been stubborn. There's a lot of disagreement in the assembly. They haven't been able to advance people's interests and the cause of basic human equality.

In that case, will the constitution ever be written?

We can make it even in two days. But it's taken so long because our selfish leaders get in the way, instead of working for the country's progress. This is why it looks increasingly improbable that the constitution will be written on time.

Unicameral or bicameral system?

A bicameral system would be best but the president should have full executive authority.

What should be the official state language?

Both Nepali and Hindi is understood by most. If oppressed and marginalised groups can lay claim to some province, they will be more likely to call Nepal their own too.
In "Empty, Stately Thapagaun" (#330), Himali Dixit wondered if modernisation would draw the Mugali Thapas back to their ancestral homes in the hilly backwaters of Muga. The seasonal road from Pakhribas, an hour by bus northwest from Dhankuta, is a significant advance on the days of horses, palanquins and good old-fashioned walking. But if today’s professional, metropolitan Thapas are too preoccupied with life in Dharan, Biratnagar and Kathmandu to consider getting back to their roots, what of their children, to whom Muga may seem as remote a prospect as Mugu?

On the face of it, Muga is simply another sparsely inhabited VDC spread across barren, reddish hills…but the two-hour stroll from Pakhribas gives me an idea why my parents are so pleased I’m visiting my ancestral village. The grand brick and mortar edifices the baby boomer generation of Mugali Thapas was born in are visible from hills away. Testament to the imagination and determination of the prosperous men who commissioned them, the Thapa houses are quite outlandish in their scale, relative to the mundanely charming cottages they tower over. In such a way must the Mugali Thapas themselves have dominated the Ghimires, Rais and Kamis they drew unto themselves as they settled far east of their Pokhreli origins in the wake of the Gorkhali conquest of Nepal 250 years ago.

But what remains of the feudal legacy of the Mugali Thapas? It’s not to be found in the shell of former Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa’s 40-room mansion, firebombed by the Maoists in 2004, down the hill (above left, bottom). Nor is it in the half-dozen mostly abandoned residences that make up Muga’s skyline. Close up you see what damage time and neglect have wrought. But tradition dies harder. This year, Thapas gathered by the hundreds for the triennial clan Dewali to honour their clan gods Seto Bara and Bindabasini. The living culture of the Mugali Thapas stands in utter contrast to the dilapidated houses of Muga.

The day before the Dewali, we wend our slow way to Muga. Scores of Thapas and 400-odd rather bewildered sacrificial goats, or boka, disembark as a steady drizzle obscures the hills. Long-lost cousins step forward to welcome us. The Thapa men – doctors, engineers, bankers, bureaucrats, farmers and the odd writer – introduce themselves by the names of their fathers and grandfathers, to polite rounds of applause. Then we scatter, glancing up from under our umbrellas at the grey firmament.

We awake on the clearest day imaginable to the

The living culture of the Mugali Thapas stands in utter contrast to the dilapidated houses of Muga
delightfully unfamiliar panorama of the Makalu range. By
seven, the clan has converged on the simple cottage housing
their gods. To the melodic racket of a panchebaja, the Thapa
dhamis (priests) hoop and holler, clashing their cymbals
as they hop around the house. As the urn representing
Bindabasini emerges from the dark interior, festooned with
long strips of red, white, blue and yellow, the womenfolk
jostle each other for a holy touch. The men then bring out
a veiled hammock, under which a silver basin filled with
lighted oil lamps is concealed. Following the stream of
joyous devotion, I take turns to shoulder the hammock.
A drawn out puja later, the killing begins. With the
gods installed in an enclosure of bamboo and leaves, the
bokas are led to the slaughter. And what a slaughter! A
boka barely has the time to stare uncomprehendingly at
the gory pyramid of heads in front of him before he’s seized
by the front legs, made to straddle a bloodied chopping
block and chhyaakk! Down flashes the blade and the
animal’s head, open eyes unseeing, tongue curling, joins
the rest. Its torso, spurting blood, is raised to the lips of
the dhami, then flung up and out to land where it might
in the dust outside, to the exclamations of a sea of villagers.
The pagan imagery of the dhami, cymbals raised to welcome
each offering, face and white robes drenched with bright
gouts of the reddest blood, is the enduring image
of the Dewali.

It’s late when we finish feeding the several hundred
villagers present. The hillside is covered in paper and
leaf plates, bones and beaten rice. The Thapas haul
their offerings home, leaving just as abruptly as they
have showed up. Muga is emptied of its festive vitality,
one again, just another Nepali village. And what do I
feel? Rooted! Muga was hardly even a place of imagined
myth for me. What does it mean to me now I have seen
something of my past?

In the dimming evening, the empty windows of
the Thapa mansions glare at me accusingly. The simple
loveliness of the hills gives air to my pastoral longings.
Could I, like my uncle Ajit Narayan Singh Thapa, join
in the endeavour to educate the local children and
nurse one of the Thapa houses back to life (above left,
top)? Could I also tolerate joining to the age-old system
of patronage? Perhaps I will choose to step back into
my past, and find some part of my future in it. For
now, discovering the land of my fathers is reward
enough.

BOKA, BANISHED:
One of 400 goats exits
the corporeal world

my fathers
An outbreak of the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, could dampen the holiday cheer this Dasain as Nepalis flock home from flu hotspots abroad and fan out into the countryside. The danger is clear and present, but the government hasn’t stepped up measures to keep out the deadly virus.

Nepal has remained largely untouched by swine flu despite the heavy toll it has taken in India, where close to 200 people have already died. So far, only 35 people have contracted the virus here, and there have been no deaths. Of these, two were foreign tourists and 28 were Nepali workers returning from abroad. The remaining five caught it from recently returned family members and friends.

These numbers may understate the flu’s true prevalence since the spot checks conducted at Tribhuvan International Airport, where the government has a health desk to scan new arrivals for symptoms of the flu, are inadequate.

“They simply check temperatures and have people fill out questionnaires. That is not enough, we don’t know if we’ve actually detected most cases of swine flu,” warns Sameer Dixit, Country Director of SUVAYU DEV PANT the Center for Molecular Dynamics.

Dixit has joined a chorus of people calling on the government to allow private labs to test for the flu. The government has so far refused to sanction this, out of concern for the costs and the reliability of tests.

“If they offer to do it for free, then sure, they can test. But will they?” wonders a dubious Jitendra Man Shrestha of the Avian Influenza Project at the Ministry of Health. Dixit says he hasn’t come across the government’s Dasain contingency plan. And checkpoints along the southern and western borders remain relaxed.

“It’s almost impossible to screen everyone that comes across the border,” says Shrestha. There are currently 50 checkpoints along the border, 18 of which see a lot of traffic, but seven of these are ill-equipped.

Besides these border checkpoints and the airport health desk, Nepal’s preparations include 40 rapid response teams across the country, a number of surveillance teams, and government aid to a couple of prominent hospitals to enable them to provide special treatment and buy the necessary drugs and equipment.

So what else can we do to steer clear of swine flu this Dasain? The age-old mode of greeting people with a folded-hand Namaste may minimise risk of transmission. But in the age of hugs and handshakes this may not go down too well, as some sociable but conscientious types have discovered already. In the meantime, Shrestha suggests, “Wash your hands.”

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**WARM WELCOME:** A TIA official goes through the motions

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**DASAIN FEVER**

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**SU-YAV-DEV-PANT**

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**SURYA NEPAL JAZZMANDU**

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Was the insurgency caused by non-vegetarians?

I visit the Braham Kumari Raj Yoga Centre in Thamel. The female devotees of the centre are serene and peaceful. They want to bring me closer to God through meditation and a few lifestyle changes.

“Don’t smoke. We don’t eat meat. We also don’t eat onions and garlic,” says Subasra Subedi, one of the devotees.

Onions and garlic? “Onions and garlic are hot materials. They raise the temperature of your body. A yogi needs to cool his body,” she says.

But I obtain my “cool” when I inhale the delectable smell of onions and garlic as I sauté them to my favourite tomato sauce, especially after commuting in a microbus with 29 other people.

So keep looking. Then I discover the Quan Yin movement, which strives for spiritual upliftment by prescribing five guidelines: no meat, drugs, lying, thievery, or immoral sex.

The movement’s contact in Nepal, Armit Karki, says meat brings “heavy karma”, while the goal is lightness of body and spirit. “We have also been connecting this to global warming. Eighty per cent of global warming is caused by meat consumption.”

Bingo! This is what I am looking for: a rational, scientific argument. I visit their website and find that meat-eating causes the most environmental destruction.

Furthermore, despite Karki’s claims, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that meat production accounts for only one-fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Ultimately, I am not sure whether I am even qualified to tell people why vegetarianism is a good choice. I am underweight, have abnormally low blood pressure, and I feel dizzy if I climb more than two flights of stairs. I am also anaemic, like one third of the women in this country.

While some movements may lump the consumption of meat with vices like drug abuse and robbery, I think it’s generally accepted that we are, in fact, omnivores. As we cherish people’s choices to rally in New Road, or seek spiritual guidance from a baby with a bad hairdo, should we also not respect their right to choose what they eat?
That Nepal is a landlocked country is a truism taught to every school-going child. What the child is not taught is to conclude that therefore Nepal has no ships, no sailors, no whales and, alas, no lobsters.

Thankfully, the shortage of lobsters is now up for reconsideration. Three months ago, the eponymous restaurant opened at Kathmandu’s coolest new address—the Sherpa Mall on Dharub Marg.

What one first notices upon entering Lobsters is that it is spacious. Spread over 8,000 square feet, and with more than 50 smartly dressed and eager-to-serve hotel management graduates as staff, Lobsters can seat up to 250 guests at any one time.

All that space, plus the two private rooms where one can also smoke the hookah, seems perfect for corporate heads or family patriarchs looking to rent a restaurant for their Dashain-Tihar parties. The terrace, which overlooks the goings-on down the street, is usually filled with young professionals chilling out after work. And the outdoor patio is an ideal venue for barbecue gatherings.

Lobsters’ indoor décor is soothing and contemporary yet eye-pleasingly understated. In fact, it could be anywhere in Sydney, London or New York. The menu is extensive, but seafood is the obvious draw. Jumbo prawns, mussels, squid, oysters, crab, red snapper and lobsters go well with the wine and the cocktails available at the bar. Seafood is brought in from Singapore and Thailand, where it is packed and transported to Nepal in the most hygienic conditions. Right next to the open-display kitchen at Lobsters, there’s a cold storage room where the seafood is kept fresh, and new supplies are brought in on a regular basis.

Despite its rapid popularity—the place was full both times we were there—Lobsters appears to have cultivated two myths in the short span of its existence.

First, that it serves only seafood. Not true. Yes, the restaurant’s name gives it a distinctive identity in the sea of look-alike Kathmandu restaurants. But this reviewer, who visited the restaurant with two vegetarians, was pleasantly surprised that Thai, Chinese, Indian and Continental dishes could be ordered and enjoyed. In fact, the butter naan and vegetables were superb. The management told us that plans are afoot to serve Mexican food.

The second myth is that Lobsters is expensive. But that depends on what you eat. Sure, ordering the signature dish to be shared at your table can set you back by a little more than Rs 4,000, which seems steep even when you are told that’s the ‘cost price’ of the lobster.

But you can have a filling lunch for just Rs 199. On Wednesday nights, the seafood buffet can be had for Rs 750. The price of a non-seafood platter with noodles, for instance, is comparable to that at any other top-flight Kathmandu restaurant, making Lobsters a delight for those who know what food and drinks to order.

The entrepreneurs behind Lobsters must be applauded for their determination to go through with an ambitious concept. They have succeeded with a multi-cuisine restaurant that offers a new dining experience for Nepalis—salt-water offerings in a fresh-water country.

For reservations call 4231323.

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA
In recent years, horror films have taken a turn for the grotesque and the sadistic, demanding firm constitutions of their audiences. Fans are now more proud of their capacity to tough out the gore on offer than concerned about whether they’re scared witless or not. The humour, fun and the DIY delight, if you excuse the pun, has been bled out of the horror genre.

This is all a preamble to how welcome this critic (whose guts flip at the sight of, well, guts) finds the return of Sam Raimi (of Evil Dead fame) to the horror genre, following his tenure at the helm of the Spider Man franchise. Guts stay safely on the inside, but thrills, chills and laughs abound in Raimi’s Drag Me to Hell.

The one-time ultra-low budget filmmaker now has a much bigger purse, allowing him to add polish even as he relies on insinuation and almost slap-stick action for most of the scares and laughs. After she denies a gypsy woman an extension on her home loan, loan officer Christine Browne (Lohman) falls victim to a curse that decrees that after being tormented by a demonic spirit for three days, it will literally, as the title suggests, drag her to hell.

Drag Me to Hell is a sequence of entertaining, deliciously wicked, funny and often gross set-pieces, (including the now-famous, incongruous smackdown between the toothless old lady hell-bent on revenge and poor Christine attempting to stave her off with a series of stationery implements). The plot, if you could call it that, is propelled by Christine’s dawning realisation of her predicament – yes, a malevolent supernatural force is actually going to drag her to hell – and her growing desperation to save herself. The meek Christine is transformed into a spunky and determined heroine ready to protect the life she has carefully planned, with its aspirations to a middle-management position and a boyfriend above her social station. The success of the film pivots on the performance of its lead, and Lohman delivers wonderfully, capturing the hand-wringing guilt and insecurities of her character, the right degree of disgust at the humiliations she has to endure, and the gritty resourcefulness she eventually comes up with.

Horror movies are often considered modern-day morality tales, and director Raimi has clearly stated his intention to have Drag Me to Hell continue in this vein. But even as it operates on the level of the typically thin moralism of the genre (don’t be mean to old ladies or an old witch is going to chew on your face and a demon is going to drag you to hell, in this case), Drag Me to Hell is amenable to a deeper interpretation. It probes the degree of suffering we tolerate, indeed cause, in our society for the sake of narrow self-interest or a sense of security. Christine’s futile effort to extricate herself from her culpability points to the damming depth of her complicity – and by extension our complicity – to the suffering and anguish of others. In Christine’s case, her lack of compassion is dressed up as protocol and business interest that masks her personal ambition, but aren’t we all alienated from the suffering of our fellow humans in some way and profiting from their misery? Luckily for viewers who aren’t interested in asking questions of such a philosophical bent, Drag Me to Hell will prove thrilling and funny as all hell.

Drag Me to Hell
Director: Sam Raimi
Cast: Alison Lohman, Lorna Raver, Justin Long, Dileep Rao
EXHIBITIONS

◊ ‘Nepal Rendezvous - Nagarkot Workshop’, paintings by Bangladeshi and Nepali artists at Hotel de l’Amannpur, Darbar Marg, 11-31 Oct, 4218048

EVENTS

◊ Patan Press Club, meets every Thursday at Dhoikuma Café, 6PM, 5522113

◊ Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Tai Chi 10-11.30AM, Yoga 8.30-9.30AM and Meditation 5-6PM weekdays, Keshar Mahal Marg, Thamel, 4410402

MUSIC

◊ Baja gaja, every Tuesday at Mokah, Pulchok, 7.30PM onwards, 5528212

◊ Live band every Friday and rooftop bbq everyday at Kausi Kitchen, Darbar Marg, 4227288

◊ Sunday Jazz brunch barbecue and live jazz music at the Terrace, Hyatt Regency, 12-3.30PM, 4491234

◊ Jazz evening at Delices de France Restaurant every Wednesday, 11AM-2PM, 4290326

◊ Some like it hot every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika’s Hotel, 7PM onwards, 4479488

◊ Happy cocktail hour, lasties night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra Café & Bar, Thamel, 5-7PM

◊ Nepali Ghalqas and songs at D’O-Lounge Beijing Duck Restaurant, every Thursday 6.30PM onwards, 4468589

◊ Rudra Night live fusion music by Shyam Nepali every Friday, 7PM at Gokarna Forest Resort, 4451212

DINING

◊ Chocolate, Coffee and Caramel, every evening at The Lounge, 4:30-9:30PM, 4491234

◊ A cafe’s café. Dhoikuma Café, Patan Douka, 5522113

◊ Jazzbät Café, relunched at Jhamshikul, 2114075

◊ The Corner Bar, 5-7PM, 3-11PM, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, 4411818

◊ Al Fresco, for home made pasta, steak and freshwater trout, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 4279999

◊ Kakori, for biryanis, curries and kebabs, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 7-10.45PM

◊ Chez Caroline for French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Revitalized, 4265070

◊ Mediterranean cuisine every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle East at The Café, Hyatt Regency, 4491234

◊ Teppanyaki meat items and garlic rice at Le Restaurant, 4438518

◊ Pitau Jour at Hotel Shankha-La Lazimp, Rs 600, 4412999

◊ Reality Bites. The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM, 4452541

◊ Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shankha-La with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards, 4412999

◊ Himalayan Rainbow Trout at Hotel Yak and Yeti, Darbar Marg, 4249899

◊ Tiger for Breakfast, breakfast everyday at 1905, Kantipath, 4221208

◊ Stupa View Restaurant, for vegetarian creations & clay oven food, 4482062

◊ Gokarna Forest Resort for a variety of sizzlers at Tripi bar, 4451212

GETAWAYS

◊ Dhillikhel Lodge Resort offers an overnight stay for Rs 1600 till 30 Sep, 4222389

◊ Relax Package at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu for Rs 5555 plus taxes, for a night of double occupancy with breakfast, complimentary use of spa.

◊ Offer valid for Nepalis and local residents only, 4498800

◊ The Fulbari Resort, offers a ‘Dhamali & Diwali Fulbari Fiesta Package’ that includes a two-night stay with BB, buffet dinner and more. 4491198, resv@fulbari.com.np

◊ Tiger Mountain, offers a safari at Tiger Tops, Chitwan National Park or Karnali Lodge & Camp this Dasain, 4361500

RECIPEs

Cut the fish into 5 cm pieces. Season well and dust in flour. In a little oil, lightly fry the onion, garlic and ginger until soft before adding the chilli powder, curry masala and the sugar. Add the vinegar, lemon juice, a little water and season with salt and pepper. Place the fish in the dressing and allow to stand in the refrigerator overnight. Serve with a salad.

Cape Malay Pickled Fish

(Serves 4)

This recipe has both Southern African and South Asian influences and one can use either saltwater or freshwater fish.

1 kg fish
500g Cape Malay Pickled Fish
2 tablespoons parsley
2 tablespoons garlic paste
2 tablespoons curry masala
1 cup vinegar
1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon pepper
Curry masala and the sugar.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepaltimes.com

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TAKE A HIKE INTO SHERPA ADVENTURE GEAR

GRAND OPENING CELEBRATION SALE
OCTOBER 1ST

Lal Durbar Marg
Next to Jai Nepal Cinema
Sunday – Friday 10-8  Saturday 11-6

TESTED BY SHERPAS. WORN BY EVERYONE.
Recently declassified ads

Since the festive season has begun, the state of emergency has been lifted, and street protests are once more allowed to snarl traffic, we can finally allow previously censored notices from our classified section to the see the light of daytime:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

It is hereby notified to all concerned that this year’s Dasain Festival has been postponed. The festival was originally supposed to be held in five phases starting 11 October, but has been put off because of rowdy behaviour by our rulers. All concerned should watch this space for new dates, but expect it to be held in April 2003, or thereabouts. Goats and buffalos earmarked for martyrdom will now be allowed to carry on with their daily lives until such time as they may again be required to be decapitated in the epic struggle of good against evil. For further information, contact the Department of Sacrifices.

ART

Home delivery of any antiques, religious objects, or statues of your choice. You tell us what to steal and we’ll steal it. Pay half now, half later. Installment schemes and bank loans on soft credit also available. Our motto: Don’t be idle as long as there are idols about. Order our catalogue today, or visit website: www.godrobbers.gov

WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM

Wanted: Tourists. Take part in Unique Weight Loss Program in Nepal. We are looking for bright, enthusiastic and adventurous visitors to walk up and down incredibly steep and food-deficit mountains for 14 days carrying 20 kg backpacks. Guaranteed to lose at least 10 kg in a week, or your money back. Age, gender and caste no bar. Apply in person, paying $30 for a three-month permit at airport.

HEALING

Hypnosis. Is the world getting too much for you? Feel up with the state of the nation? Let our registered hypnotherapists take you on a trance. Sleep through the troubles and wake up when the country has been set right. Emerge from your sleeplike state a new man and/or woman. Contact: unsleepy_verysleepy_unasleep@snore.com

POLITICS

Is there a technocrat in you? Do you have what it takes to be in the New Cabinet? Then you may be just the guy we’ve been looking for, but can’t find. Meet us tomorrow morning before dawn at Nag Pokhari for walk-in interview. Bring cv with poster-size photograph. Password: Happy Days Are Here Again.

COUNTRY TO LET

Lovely, spacious, fully furnished, landlocked Himalayan kingdom is available for immediate lease on a management contract. Excellent access to and from all neighbourhood attractions. Walking distance from India. Period and price negotiable. Highly experienced prime ministers, presidents and junta leaders with good financial capacity may kindly bring their full particulars when they call us after Dasain Holidays. No, wait, make that next year some time.

SPORTS

Immediate job openings for at least 15 Nepali athletes in the category boxing, shooting and weight-lifting at South Korean sausage factory. Attractive salary, free hot dogs for lunch. Contact: Relatives in the Greater Seoul Metropolitan Area.

VACANCY

Chief Executive Joker required for Nepal’s top newspaper. Incumbent is losing it.

The Ass is on holiday until the issue of Oct.9, so we have reprinted an Under My Hat column by Kunda Dixit from Nepali Times #115, 11-17 October 2002. For Under My Hat archives go to: www.nepalitimes.com